

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-25-107910](#), a testimony before the Subcommittee on Coast Guard and Maritime Transportation, Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

Since the Arctic is largely a maritime domain, the U.S. Coast Guard, a multi-mission military service within the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), plays a key role in Arctic policy implementation and enforcement. As more navigable ocean water has emerged and human activity increases in the region, the Coast Guard faces growing responsibilities to assess and manage risks. These include risks to maritime safety, security, and the environment.

This statement discusses: (1) Coast Guard actions to assess and mitigate risks in the Arctic region, and (2) key challenges the Coast Guard faces that may affect its Arctic operations and its ability to meet its strategic commitments.

This statement is based primarily on our 2024 report examining Coast Guard Arctic operational risks, and our 2023 report on Coast Guard acquisitions. This statement also includes updated 2024 data on the Coast Guard's shore infrastructure backlog. For the reports cited in this statement, GAO analyzed Coast Guard and Department of Defense documentation and data, and interviewed officials from these agencies.

What GAO Recommends

GAO has made more than 30 recommendations since 2016 to the Coast Guard and DHS in reports on Coast Guard Arctic operations, acquisition, and shore infrastructure issues. As of November 2024, 19 remain open. GAO continues to monitor progress on these recommendations.

For more information, contact Heather MacLeod at (202) 512-8777 or macleodh@gao.gov.

November 14, 2024

COAST GUARD

Arctic Risks Assessed, but Information Gaps and Numerous Challenges Threaten Operations

What GAO Found

The Coast Guard has assessed risks that affect its ability to carry out its missions in the U.S. Arctic region, such as those posed by increased maritime activity and by potential adversaries such as Russia and China. It has partnered with the Department of Defense and others to mitigate these risks and included this information in planning documents. These plans include the Coast Guard's Arctic strategy and its implementation plan. However, the implementation plan does not include key metrics such as performance measures, targets, or timeframes for action items. This may make it difficult for the Coast Guard to determine resource needs, assess progress toward strategic objectives, and ensure its efforts are aligned with national Arctic efforts. GAO also found that key mission performance information was incomplete or missing, such as the number of days ships were deployed in the Arctic region and the time they spent on various missions there.

The Coast Guard has multiple strategic commitments for its Arctic operations but has been unable to meet all of them in recent years in part due to asset availability challenges. These include a lack of icebreakers, and competing demands for major cutters elsewhere. Further, limited infrastructure and logistics capabilities in Alaska amplify asset challenges in the Arctic region. The Coast Guard is making efforts to address them via major acquisition projects, such as for the new Polar Security Cutter, but these ships continue to face significant delays and cost issues. Since 2016, GAO has issued several reports and made numerous recommendations to improve Coast Guard Arctic planning and acquisition programs.

Coast Guard Operational and Planned Fleet of Polar Icebreakers, 2024



Source: GAO analysis of U.S. Coast Guard (USCG) information; GAO (icons); U.S. Coast Guard photos by (left to right) PA2 NyxoLyno Cangemi; Rob Rothway; Bollinger Mississippi Shipbuilding. | GAO-25-107910

The Coast Guard uses its shore infrastructure assets—such as piers and maintenance buildings—to support legacy assets that operate in the Arctic region, such as icebreakers and other cutters. In 2019, GAO found that the estimated cost of the Coast Guard's shore infrastructure project backlog totaled at least \$2.6 billion. GAO made six recommendations to address these issues, two of which the Coast Guard has fully implemented. However, as of November 2024, GAO's preliminary analysis showed that the estimated cost of this shore infrastructure backlog had more than doubled to over \$7 billion.